

The background of the entire image is a dark, nighttime landscape. In the upper left quadrant, a bright full moon hangs in the sky, casting a soft glow. In the lower center, a man and a woman are seen from behind, walking away from the viewer along a path. They are holding hands, and their figures are silhouetted against the lighter ground and the distant horizon.

# vaarana

S T Lakshmikumar

# vaarana

S T Lakshmikumar



सर्वहिताय - स्वान्तसुखाय



# **नमो गुरुभ्यः**

I am deeply indebted to  
Everyone who helped me learn  
Through  
Teaching, Discussion and Argument

---



|

J was staring idly at the waves as the boat rolled gently. He had nothing much to do. He was the solitary human on board. Not that he wanted company. Nor could he spend his time sailing this boat. Sailing has never even been a hobby. He was totally ignorant about waves, wind and sailing. He would have floundered on the smallest boat in a few feet of water. And this was a full-fledged ocean going boat which was thankfully completely computer controlled. It could make optimum use of the wind, adjusting the sails as needed. It had an electric motor as a backup running on solar electricity. It probably had a sophisticated weather monitoring system. It always steered into smooth weather and he had never experienced even a small squall. The genie in the boat had been keeping him alive for over an year without any inconvenience.

He swung his head around looking at the horizon from north to south as the setting sun lighted up the waves in front of him. Then he stiffened. He thought he saw

something bright yellow floating on the waves. For a minute he thought it was something like a life preserver. It was quite some distance away and he could not be sure. It floated into sight on the crest of a wave and disappeared very quickly. It could have been some debris floating along in the ocean current just as his own boat was, he thought. But somehow he was a bit intrigued. It was too far to be certain but he thought he saw enough to think that there was a human body attached to that life preserver.

Precious little he could do to verify what the object which drew his attention was. Once again his mind went back to that day when he first boarded this boat. He was aimlessly walking along the sea shore in Brisbane when he joined a party. In the contemporary era of informal human interactions, it was no surprise that he knew no one in that small crowd. It was a typical get together of individuals who had nothing specific to do, just like ninety nine percent of humanity. The *special* one percent were busy in their enclaves of the superiors, pitting their natural brains against each other and the computers, devising ways to better provide for the rest at no cost.

For most others, life was an unending beach party where every craving of the human body could be satisfied with no great difficulty. His joining a group of strangers for a drunken orgy was the contemporary norm rather than an

exception. His being marooned on this boat was the mysterious consequence. He did not even remember many details of how he got on the boat. It was with a lot of subsequent effort that he vaguely recollected being on a rowboat with about a dozen others and then a couple of hours later groggily making his way to a bunk bed in a cabin. But he remembered even now very clearly, waking up with a huge hangover towards an evening and discovering himself all alone with no shore in sight and the boat moving slowly and majestically along.

Thinking about it later, he wasn't sure if the rest just forgot him and set the boat adrift as a prank or if they decided that leaving him aboard was more fun. His implanted mobile connectivity link just said "*Out Of Range*". He could not even throw the link around to show his frustration. He had screamed in impotent rage and fear for a while but eventually stopped and got down to practical issues. He searched around and found a fully functional solar powered desalination unit, in addition of course to a well-stocked bar and a few snacks on the table. That combination cooled him down a lot.

He sat for a few hours, nursing his drink and half hoping to see a helicopter or other airborne surveillance system that would track him. That did not happen and the sun began to set. Being lonely was no big deal anyhow. He had been a

loner for quite a few years now. The drinks helped too, and presently he returned to his sleeping quarters of the previous night.

A second day passed in the same cycle of drinking, eating and sleeping and by the third morning he was certain that a rescue was definitely not to be counted upon. He did not know who owned the boat. He did not know if the owner was part of the group that rowed over to it. Nor did he know if anyone reported the boat missing. Gritting his teeth he had returned to exploring the boat to see if he could himself trigger the rescue.

There was a sudden lurch of the boat and he returned to the present. His thoughts returned to the life preserver he thought he saw. He was startled to say the least. The boat had gained considerably on the object of his thoughts and it was now visible more often among the moving waves and more clearly too. It was undoubtedly a life preserver and there was something attached to it. It was quite small. He realized that if it was a human body, it was a child's!

This was much worse than being adrift without any idea of where he was going. He did not know how to overtake the object in sight and bring onboard whoever was attached to the life preserver. The fact remained that he was drifting along in life itself and did not much care where he was.

That was partly the reason he never worried very much about his continued solitude once he realized that he could not simply call up emergency services.

He had found that there was a fairly large stock of preserved food that needed only to be microwaved before eating. He found that in addition to a solar desalination plant the boat had an automatic fishing system that not only fished but processed the catch and stored in a freezing compartment, ready for cooking or even eating raw. The boat had enough food and water for one individual to survive indefinitely he realized. The desalinated water was enough even for a regular bath.

Trying to break into the navigation system was something else. Everytime he touched any button on the console there would be a demand for authentication or passwords. He finally gave up the thought of broadcasting an SOS. But he realized a few days later that the boat was not drifting aimlessly and was travelling in a south easterly direction. This intrigued him. Apparently someone in the crowd who had abandoned him had not merely taken off the anchor and allowed the boat to go whither it will. They had set a course. And in a few days he found how that was done.

There was one input console in what possibly was the captain's cabin where a command could set a new

destination. He found some pieces of paper with different city names scribbled on them. There was some kind of a drawing of lots which decided the current course. He tried doing it himself and found that he could more or less reverse the current course and return the way he had come by demanding that the boat take him back to Brisbane.

But he changed course again after a couple of days. Drifting along in solitary splendour with reasonable food and excellent wine suited him fine. Why go back to Brisbane? He had very little to attract him there or for that matter anywhere else in the world. There were no emotional links, no job, no responsibility, no nothing. No one missed him anywhere. No one was praying for his return or sorrowing in his absence.

He glanced again in the direction he last saw the life preserver. There was very little doubt now. It was a small human child. His boat was slowly narrowing the distance and he could perhaps effect a rescue by swimming with a rope in a short while. It was most unlikely that the child was still alive.

How did this child ended up being alone on the ocean in a life preserver he wondered. Human societies had come a long way since air travel. It was deemed too damaging to the environment to permit air travel except under

extraordinary circumstances. So an air crash survival was out of question. The development of virtual reality gadgets had ensured that people did not miss traveling to distant places for sightseeing. No one was permitted to travel very much since it indirectly helped mitigate climate change. Unlikely that the child was the survivor of a sunk ship. Was he quite close to a human habitation from which this baby had been swept out to sea? Or was it some kind of a small boat that capsized near the beach? In any case recovering the child could force his hand. He might have to return to *civilization* if one still wanted to use that word for the society of this day. He was most reluctant.

It was bad enough to go back to Brisbane, or some other city, quietly abandon the boat and slip away. It was quite another to explain the rescued child or body! Unlike in historical times, it was not punishment that one feared, merely bureaucratic exchanges. No one was punished anymore. It was held most inhumane to do so. So many psychological justifications were being offered as mitigating circumstances for any crime, that societies stopped bothering to have the formalities of charging a culprit and having a court case.

That was part of the reason for his reluctance to return too. His parents were murdered and he was unwilling to accept the societal norm that deemed it unnecessary to even

investigate. Like most of his contemporaries he had become used to a life where theft was only a historical concept. People routinely took what they wanted and since productivity was so large, everything was freely available, in plenty. So it was merely a minor inconvenience to replenish whatever was taken. But he was unable to extend this argument to murder and quietly accommodate to the loss of his parents.

He was most likely a misfit in the contemporary world. His parents were among the *specials*. Those who had the intellectual capabilities to participate in *productive* activity. They were among the few who were in charge of the millions of robots which produced everything from food to medical services for everyone else. They however did not have any weapons. That was prohibited to prevent the specials from becoming rulers and as it tragically turned out for his parents, to protect themselves from attackers.

That was part of the latest global compromise entered into. Intellectual independence and satisfaction for the *specials* and freebies for the rest. Mankind had been lurching from one compromise to another over the last few centuries, ever since it became clear to everyone that the days of the nation states were over. Thanks to global warming, there were dozens of hurricanes in one burst all over the world. That finally convinced everyone that the climate of the

world was modified by carbon dioxide emissions from human activity. Of course it also proved that the so called intergovernmental agreements and mechanisms were a load of bullshit that could never do anything useful. It is often said to be the last nail in the coffin of individual national sovereignty.

The movement of people affected by climate change was too large and the national boundaries were ignored as they migrated in large numbers. When the low lying areas in Bangladesh got flooded, the migration caused India to go up in flames. That death toll was more than a hundred million, double the estimate for the so called second world war of the twentieth century. It hastened the installation of a global government.

Contrary to the hopes of the atheists, religious beliefs had not disappeared. Significant number of Muslims had been resisting any tinkering with their religion even during the era of nation states. The social scientists had been proved to be utter idiots for thinking that all religions were similar. The ideas of European Enlightenment had reformed Christianity in about two centuries at a huge human cost. The Hindus who suffered under Muslim rule for half a millennium in contrast miraculously reformed in under a hundred years with virtually no human cost. But the social scientists had totally failed to evaluate the strength of the

Muslim societal norms which enabled them to establish their rule from Spain to India in less than fifty years after the death of Prophet Muhammad.

Not only had the Muslims resisted reform, they had become an example to emulate for other religions across the globe. Tribal and animist faiths, the various sects of Christianity, Hindu and Buddhist groups had all remodeled themselves into extremely literalist conservative clones of Islam. The devout coalesced into small close knit communities that stayed away from the urban areas.

Significant number of individuals drifted away from these religious groups in a continuous stream to form a jobless, godless, discipline less, purposeless life of urban modernity. But thanks to the religious teachings, the reproduction rate among the devout in their enclaves was high and they could afford the defections. It was like the pre European Enlightenment period which he had read about. Death tolls were so high in urban areas that the cities survived purely by migration from the rural areas.

A global socialist utopia was tried for while till the socialist governance, in the eternal quest for an egalitarian society and mitigating the most microscopic inequalities started damaging the technological behemoth itself and production of necessities and yes, luxuries began to suffer.

After a lot of internecine warfare the rurals and urbanites agreed that leaving the *specials* incharge of technology was necessary for both groups. The *specials* convinced everyone that armies were redundant in a world without boundaries and the violence by the religious groups became sporadic and low intensity, matching the purposeless localized violence by the urban gangs.

Unfortunately he never could know whether the fire bomb attack on his parents was from the religious group nearby, angered by their scientific debunking of religious mythology or the urban street urchins, angered by their demand for some peace and quiet. Unfortunately the rest of the world did not care. The urbanite official powers that be, were not bothered. They assumed that whoever had done it must have had some justifiable psychological reason. Investigation and prosecution were a waste of time and effort. The religious groups living nearby refused to even question their people. If a devout had done the deed, he had the greatest justification. Killing an apostate or a blasphemer was an act of great merit.

J returned to the present with a start! He was now pretty close to the life preserver. He could confirm that there was a small child in it. Thankfully moreover, his boat was going to pass by the child about ten or twenty meters on the left. He sighed in relief. If the boat had directly rammed into the

child he wouldn't have been able to do anything. The control from the captain's cabin could permit him to set a course for San Francisco if he so wished but not to move left or right by a few degrees! As it is he could just go down the rope ladder hanging on the side and use the rope anchor which he used while swimming for relaxation. He could hopefully hoist the body on to the deck but then he did not know what he was supposed to do after that.

He really hated the idea of returning to the inhabited world, particularly now that he had spent more than a year in solitude. The indifference of the world to the wanton death of his parents rankled still. They were unique and for that matter so was he himself. None of the *specials* he knew through his parents had children. They had repeatedly argued with his parents that the odds of children following the parents and becoming *special* were very low, regression to the mean was an established reality. So it would be appropriate for his parents not to have a child.

His parents were special among the *specials*. They replied to their friends that they did not mind. They said, "As it is the world consists of many people who keep looking forward to a doomsday when God would punish the infidels. Most of the rest behave as if the world is ending tomorrow and the only thing to be done is self indulgence. Both the contemporary devout and licentious needed to

find a better way of living and the *specials* with their technology obsession are not the ones to find it. Having a child is our way of trying to show the world how to create a new path."

He had lived with his parents and enjoyed their intellectual capabilities and creativity even if he could contribute nothing to the discussion on hand. His father would often smile and say, "A creator needs and enjoys an appreciative audience. At least this one does." They also disdained to follow the rest of the *specials* who isolated themselves from the rest of humanity. The *specials* typically thought of the rest as unteachables, as a subspecies that had to be given their playthings since several billion of them cannot be wished away or suppressed as the recent past had shown. He suspected that many *specials* did look forward to an earth entirely populated by a few million *specials* rather than several billion humans as at present.

He often wondered if his parents kept in touch with the common people for his personal benefit. But that was unlikely. They genuinely enjoyed arguing with the devout and counseling the lost. It was most unfortunate that he had gone down into the basement for some exercise that day. Half an hour later he found the door completely jammed. When he managed to break the door, wondering and worrying about his parents all the while, he came up

into smoking ruins of the upper floors with both his parents dead and half burnt.

Robots had responded to the emergency and were clearing the debris. He was intimated by the *system* a few minutes later that there had been a fire bomb attack a few minutes earlier and that his parents had died instantly. His survivor guilt added to his misery. He reluctantly joined the indifferent lost population around him. That was better than recanting, confessing and joining the devout groups, the only other alternative. He would have needed too much pharmacological alteration of his brain, it was no longer politically correct to call that *using drugs*, to have done that.

J suddenly stopped reminiscing and rushed to the left rail of the boat. He rapidly pulled off his jeans and T shirt. The child was now about twenty meters away. He tied a rope around himself, checked that the other end was securely fastened to the rail and climbed over the rail, carefully stepping onto the rope ladder. He lowered himself into the water and started swimming. In a few minutes he could catch the child. He stopped to take a long breath. He grabbed the life preserver and swam back towards the boat. The child he noticed at a glance was by no means a decayed dead body as he half expected. He carefully pulled himself and the child up the ladder. Not an easy task for someone not too used to strenuous work. At last it was

over. Both the child and he were over the rail into the safety of the boat and then the reality hit him. The child, a girl, about four years old at a guess, was very much alive!

||

J could clearly see the chest heaving, though the little thing had her eyes closed and appeared unconscious. J panicked. He was trained to be indifferent to accidents and emergencies. "Everyone and everything is linked to the *"System"* which continuously monitored the vital signals of every individual. "The *System* would know about the emergency before you are able to recognize it and respond," he was told again and again, "You can send a voice SOS message if you are getting anxious."

Here he was with a clear case of a medical emergency. The personal mobile connectivity link still said "*Out Of Range.*" So the robotic medical personnel dispatched by the *System* were not going to take over. He knew next to nothing about medical resuscitation or nursing the sick. He had no medical supplies, no special food, no understanding of what *vital signs* are. Like most people in the world, he didn't even know how to monitor the pulse. The emergency medical supplies cabinet was another part of the boat he

could not break into. But it does not matter he thought. He wouldn't know what to use and how.

Even more frighteningly, he did not know what was the nearest place of human habitation. When he decided to enjoy his solitude onboard and not return to Brisbane, he realized that he had to set some other destination if only to avoid landing in Brisbane. So he made it a practice to change the destination every couple of weeks or so. He had changed so many and the boat had changed direction so often that he had no idea of how far he was from the current destination set by him which was Midway! He had no idea of how long it would take to get there either.

He might be much closer to some other place. The baby wouldn't have survived for more than a day or two on the sea. If she has drifted from a beach, that place would be nearest. But he knew the names of few cities with harbours. The monitor would not accept island names or geographical landmarks. He got nowhere, when in an earlier attempt he asked the onboard computer to set the destination as the great barrier reef. Of course it is the new one, recreated after climate change had killed the original.

No! No use of all these idle thoughts. He was responsible and he had to act. He rapidly separated the child from the life preserver and then removed the swimming costume.

He took the child to the captain's cabin and vigorously rubbed with a towel hoping that the stimulation would do some good. The child must be famished. What should he feed her with? The seventeenth century literature he had read for entertainment often recommended brandy. He supposed wine would have to do. He brought a small quantity and dipped his finger in it and introduced it in the child's mouth. He relaxed as the child began to suck. He repeated for a few minutes and then decided to await developments.

There were none, the child appeared relaxed and was breathing fairly uniformly now. He covered her up and started exploring the food stock. He finally found a few packets of soup and a couple of straws. That gave him an idea. He kept sucking up small quantities of warm soup with the straw and releasing it into the child's mouth. He had to maneuver the straw past the teeth for doing so but he was gratified by the child swallowing the soup. A couple of hours later he felt the child's body become very hot. There was nothing he could do than sponging with a cold towel and hoping for the best. He nursed the little one throughout the night and finally the child opened the eyes around sunrise.

She took one look at him and screamed, "Mama! Where are you?" She was obviously frightened of a stranger. But it

resolved a big worry for J. The child apparently spoke English. Language would not be the major limitation. He was secretly shuddering how to communicate with the child. There were no visible ethnic features and he himself spoke nothing other than English.

The child continued crying for her mother while J tried to console her without actually touching her. He repeated the same statement, "Darling, please stop crying and tell me where your mama is, and I will take you to her." He was too nervous to give the child an embrace and the child was too tired to actually get out of the bunk. After a long bout of crying the child slipped back into exhausted sleep and J continued his effort to get nourishment into her.

The cycle continued. J was surprised at his own patience and perseverance. Then he recollected his mother telling him that he could become a good father or elder brother. Unfortunately his own birth was complicated and his mother lost any further chance of having children, leaving him a single child. Suddenly the child got up and jumped out of the bunk and ran out of the cabin, screaming, "Mama!".

He started after the child who was on unsteady legs and running around aimlessly to locate her mother. He hugged her and repeated his assurance. "Mummy is not here on

the boat and I will take you home as soon as possible if you tell me where your home is."

"Mummy! I will never again do it. Please come. Don't go away, I am afraid," the child sobbed. Seeing that the child had not realized that the mother was not just round the corner, he picked her up despite the resistance and walked around the boat. Slowly the child realized that there was no one else around and subsided into sobbing and eventually into exhausted sleep again.

J himself slipped into exhausted sleep in the second bunk, after nursing the child continuously for more than twenty four hours and was startled into wakefulness when he felt a little hand touching his face and asking "Are you a genie?"

"A genie! No darling. I am just a man".

"What's a man?"

"Well like your papa I mean."

"What's a papa?"

"Well, father or dad or whatever else you call him." The child appeared totally confused. So he asked, "Who lives with you other than mama?"

"My sister Ani."

"And your name is?"

"Ila."

"And where do you live?"

"In my house."

"How do you go to your house?"

"By stairs."

"No. I meant do you use a bus or a car?"

"What's a bus?"

J realized there is no point in rushing with this questioning. Clearly Ila had very little idea of addresses and names. It will be a huge problem to get her back home, even if he managed to reach some center of civilization and then convince whoever was in charge to help. "What about some breakfast Ila?" he asked and added a pantomime.

She said, "Yes. Ila wants milk."

He fed Ila and had his breakfast. "I wish you were a genie. We could fly back to mummy," she said.

He smiled and said. "Sorry darling. I am not one. I cannot fly you but we will go there very soon. But I do not know where your house is. Tell me, do you know the name of the place where you live?"

"Home."

J took a deep breath. Then he approached from a different angle. Honey, "You know I found you in the sea. So tell me why you went for swimming?"

Ila started crying. "Mummy will be so angry. She told me not to go there".

"Go where?"

"On to the pipes."

"Why did you?"

"There was a small bird".

"You wanted to catch it?"

"Yes."

"Then?"

"I fell into water."

"Okay. I will tell mummy not to be angry. But were the pipes very big?"

"Yes. Very big."

"And what is there at the other end of the pipe?"

"Ani told me ships come there. And they go to far places like Africa! Ani says there are big animals there. Lions that could eat you. Giraffes that are as tall as a house. They can come through my bedroom window and eat me she said."

J reassured her. "Giraffes eat leaves of plants."

"Yes. Mama told me. She told Ani not to scare me."

Okay. We are getting somewhere thought J. That is some kind of a harbor. If only she could remember the name of the place it could be possible to return her to her family!

"Ila dear, who told you about genie?"

"Grandma."

"Oh! Where does she live?"

"At her home."

Grimacing he asked, "How do you go to her house."

"You go down stairs then walk for a bit."

"And does your grandfather also stay there?"

"What is a grandfather?"

"Who lives with your grandmother?"

"Aunt Ria. Grandma cannot walk. Aunt Ria helps her."

"How did you go from your home to the beach?"

"Mum and me walked. I am a big baby now. Mum doesn't have to carry me. Tini is so small."

"Who is Tini?"

"She lives in the next house. Her mother is a doctor."

"And who all live in Tini's house?"

"Tina, Vega, Ritu and their mother. Ritu and Vega are much older than me. They look exactly same. Rita wears yellow dress and Vega wears green. So we know."

"And their father?"

"What is a father? I already told you I do not know! Is a father also a genie?"

Where did this girl come from J wondered? First he thought this might have been an orphanage or something like that run by a group of nuns. He had heard that even these days some of those were functioning. But this appears to be an all girls beach home of some type, where the individual apartments were all taken by women. But it hardly helped to identify the place. "Does your doctor auntie next door go to a hospital by car?"

"What's a car?"

J was floored. "Well, how does she go to the hospital?"

"By walk. Only very old people use wheelchairs. Grandma does when she goes to hospital."

He read that ancient Muslim rulers had harems with hundreds of women in one palace building with one sultan as the sole male. But thinking that Ila lived in one is as crazy as Ila thinking of him as a genie.

Next day, he felt externally itchy and decided to have a shave. As soon as Ila saw him she exclaimed. "You look so much nicer. But does it not hurt to remove all the hair?"

"No darling."

"But why do you have hair on the face also?"

"Well. Because I am a man!" He almost bit his tongue. Here we go again.

The child merely said "I never met one before."

"Did you see a lion and a lioness at least in photos?"

"No. Ani said something about lions but mum said I am too little to understand and that she would teach me later."

Late that night, as he was taking a shower she banged on the door. Apparently she was frightened by some strange noise on deck. It only turned out to be sea lions on a nearby islet but the sequel was extremely funny. He looked at him without a shirt and laughed. "How will you feed babies with those?" she asked pointing to his male nipples.

"Well dear, once again, I am a man and I cannot have babies and cannot feed them either."

"Like aunt Lilly who lives next door to granny? She always pets me and says "I really wish I could have a baby like you."

"Are there many aunties near your house who have no children?" he asked.

"Oh! Yes. Mummy doesn't like them and when we go to beach we stay with other mummies."

"How many people are there on the beach?

"Oh! Many. So many." she demonstrated with hands spread wide. His curiosity about this abode of women was rapidly becoming even more of a motivation to find it than to restoring Ila to her mother.

He had a disturbed sleep that night. A painful raw blister in the groin area kept him moving from position to position throughout night. Finally he went onto the deck, undressed and was applying some cold lard from the freezer on the area. He had nothing else. Ila woke up and came out looking for him. Understandably she was still quite nervous if left alone. To his surprise she wasn't taken aback at all about his nudity. She told him quite matter of frankly, "Many aunties and children go to the beach without clothes. But mummy doesn't like that."

So there was even a nude beach on that strange home of Ila. Must be a reasonably large place. Then Ila piped up again. "What is that?"

There was no mistaking what she was pointing at. "Well dear, I have it because I am a male. Did you not see any small boys on that beach where no one wears clothes?"

"No. And no one has hair all over their bodies, the way you have. Why do you have hair all over your body?"

Now the situation was quite clear. She certainly came from a women only place. He smiled as he recollected the story from Hindu mythology about a nation of women which was at least much more pleasant than the Amazons of Greek mythology. But certainly this modern mythical place was worth going to the end of the world to see.

A few days later, Ila having settled down to some extent, J returned to the life preserver and swimsuit that he had pushed to a corner of the deck on the day of rescue. He wanted to deflate the life preserver and fold it all up into a package for stowing. He found the preserver a bit strange and was searching around for a proper way of deflating and found none. It looked to be some kind of use and discard system. It was attached to the swimsuit.

There was pocket on the swimsuit from which the preserver had been ejected. Looking curiously at the contraption he got a shock. Inside the pocket was a label; consignee Vaarana 112.4514E, 12.9967S. Presumably the longitude and latitude of the place and its name. But why no mention of the country? Another riddle. More importantly, will his boat recognize this place Vaarana as a destination?

Nothing to lose by trying. He went to the captain's cabin and changed the destination to Vaarana. He was thrilled as

the boat changed course immediately. He turned to inform Ila and then checked himself. He did not know if this was the correct destination. He did not know how long it would take to reach there. Better not excite the little child. Disappointment would be quite a stress. He decided to say nothing for the moment.

### |||

J watched idly out of the porthole at the moonlight reflecting from the waves and water. In the second bunk Ila was sleeping peacefully. She continued to ask and wish for returning home but was now quite manageable. The two of them had a good time talking and playing little games together. Even cooking with the little one perched on the table and suggesting outrageous combinations of the available food was very enjoyable too.

She had been filling a void in J's life and he was really on the horns of a dilemma. On one side he was hoping that the boat would take them both to Vaarana and that Ila would be happily reunited with her family. On the other hand he was dreading his return to an aimless and lonely life. The thought did keep intruding, that the boat hopefully would not take them to Ila's house or at least not too soon. He ruthlessly pushed that thought away and returned to fervently hoping for a happy reunion for Ila. But it was becoming more difficult by the day. His thoughts went back to his earlier attempts at having a family.

Unfortunately it had become impossible in contemporary society. He did not fit into any of the three groups that existed. On one hand he was not intellectually competent to be a *special*. Most of them trained or mesmerized themselves into accepting pure intellectual satisfaction as the only goal of life.

He was not willing to satisfy his emotional requirements through purely physical methods. That was what the urban milieu was all about. Using psycho-pharmacology to influence the mind. Sure, science over the centuries has made this safe and reliable with none of the problems which the hippies had, smoking hashish half a millennium ago. That made it so very easy to settle comfortably into any sexual pattern of one's own choice or even creativity. The doctor would prescribe medication to enable you to be comfortable with that life choice. There were still quite a few heterosexual couples left among the urbanites but hardly anyone bothered with monogamous relationships or procreation. The women were not to be bothered. Medical technology has made contraception absolutely reliable and abortion was a historical practice.

At the same time he was not willing to completely renounce his intellectual freedom and settle into accepting a literalist religion. That was the price the women who were willing to *marry* even in this era demanded. The

devout employed self hypnosis with literalist religion rather than chemicals to avoid the reality. Neither the devout nor the urbanites had any real work to do. That was for the robots. Here he was, hoping for an integral development of his body, mind and intellect as his parents had demonstrated and falling short.

His thoughts were interrupted by an unusual sound and he walked on to the deck to notice that the boat had come to a halt and that a chain was slowly lowering the anchor on the starboard side. So they had reached the destination. Sure enough. The monitor in the cabin now read, *Arrived At Destination*.

It was still quite dark but it would be dawn in a few hours. He moved to the port side and could discern that there were some kind of structures but no lighting whatsoever. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness he could see that there was some kind of a wharf or platform at which the boat has berthed. He waited with mixed emotions. Curiosity about this abode of women, happiness for the little kid if she gets to meet her family, pity for his own lonely future existence competed.

As dawn broke he could clearly see that the platform was some kind of oil or gas jetty matching the description that Ani gave to Ila, that ships sometime were seen there.

Obviously the ships delivered energy supplies. The pipeline stretched into the horizon and there were probably no high rise buildings. At least one could not see any lights belonging to them. As the light improved further he could see a few low level buildings about half a kilometer away and a semicircle of low hills in the far horizon. He decided to bring Ila down to see the scenario. He walked back to the cabin and stood looking longingly at the innocent child sleeping. The next moment will change their relationship forever. He shrugged and then called, "Ila dear, I want you to come and look at something."

She woke up, smiled and got out of the bunk. He was always surprised at how quickly she became totally awake and alert. No lazy stretching and mumbling for her. "Let's go," she said.

One look at the horizon and she screamed. "I am home. Mummy! Thank you so much J for bringing me home." She gave him a big hug and then started jumping up and down in excitement.

It was all he could do to hold her and exclaim. "Darling you would not want to fall in the sea again do you? Cool down and we will go on to the wharf together." He slowly lowered both of them on to hard ground using the port side rope ladder. He then started carefully examining the sea and the

pipeline. The first thing he noticed was the enormous number of concrete blocks strewn around in the sea. They made a partial enclosure for the basin and he noticed that the ebb tide was quite strong. It would be extremely tough to swim to the beach, even for himself, let alone carrying Ila. It also explained Ila being swept out to sea. He then looked more carefully, keeping a strong hand on Ila's shoulder to prevent the child taking any risky action.

He finally located a spidery walkway below the pipes, presumably used for inspection and repairs. It was not exactly safe for Ila but then it was the only viable path forward. He hoisted Ila onto his back and slowly started walking towards the shore. Ila was extremely excited as was to be expected and that added to the risks. As he closed in to the shore, Ila started calling out to the few people walking or running on the beach for their morning calisthenics. They were too far to hear however and he eventually reached a locked gate. He was wondering what to do next when he saw the calling bell for emergencies located above the gate. He pressed it and waited.

Within a minute a woman wearing a work apron stepped out of a door turned to face him and immediately stepped back as if staring at a ghost. She controlled herself with some difficulty and then asked, "Who are you? And where did you come from?"

J responded. "This is Ila. I believe she is a child swept out to sea from here several weeks ago. I was travelling by boat and rescued her. My name is J. I am from Australia."

She was simply flabbergasted but managed to squeak out a welcome as she opened the gate and ushered them into a small room that was obviously some kind of a control room associated with the pipeline. She was about to explain to the second person in the room when Ila screamed "Aunt Ria!"

J set Ila down. Ila flew into the arms of the woman who hugged her and burst into tears. The first women now introduced herself, "I am Neila. Obviously words are not enough to explain how happy we are all. This is a small community and everyone has been devastated. Some people actually saw from a distance Ila falling into the water. She had her special electronically controlled microlife preserver attached to the swimsuit which was immediately activated.

"But we saw no trace of her and assumed the worst. Ila slipped off from her mother talking to a friend on the beach and no one really could understand how or why she climbed through the wire fence. Her mother had been simply inconsolable, thinking that it was her negligence that caused the tragedy."

"Ila told me she ran behind some pretty bird and slipped from the tubes" said J.

Ria burst in, "Neila, I think I will take Ila to her mother immediately. Guess I will take you also along," she said addressing J. "Can you manage alone for a short while?"

"OK. I think it is better I inform the chief counselor immediately," said Neila.

As Ria and J walked out of another door with Ila, the child asked with a quivering voice, "Do you think mummy will be very angry with me?"

"No dear," reassured both Ria and J. "I am very sure she will be extremely happy to have you back" said J.

"I walked around on the beach that day and then missed mamma. I really looked for her. But I could not see her. Then I saw a beautiful bird. It hopped away when I tried to catch it. Then I crawled under that fence to catch it."

Reassuring Ila again that mummy will not be angry, J and Ria walked along what appeared to be a fairly long curving corridor which was deserted. Ria smiled and said, "It is bit too early. Most people would not have woken up." Then Ria directed J to a staircase cum ramp. They climbed to the first floor and after a short walk took them to an apartment

door. Ila was excited beyond words and began banging on the door crying "Mummy, mamma" at a high pitch.

Her mother opened the door and almost fainted as Ila jumped on her. An elder girl who J correctly guessed was Ani, Ila's elder sister, came out rubbing her eyes and was equally shocked. The mother and two daughters were in a tight embrace, all of them crying and all three talking all at once and not caring if the other two were listening.

After a while the mother controlled herself to the point of listening to Ria and turned to thank the savior. she hugged J and tried to express her gratitude and relief in incoherent words with occasional bouts of crying. Ila broke this up saying "I am hungry."

As the mother turned to something practical, J began explaining to Ria, in more detail, his role in the rescue. "I was just wondering how you could locate this island at all. Surely Ila could not have directed you," asked Ria.

J smiled. "I could not have brought the boat here even if she had done that! Though I am on a solitary cruise on my boat, I cannot control the destination except in a very rudimentary way. There was a tag on the swimsuit mentioning Vaarana as the consignee along with the latitude and longitude. It was sheer luck that the computer aboard my boat recognized the reference and brought us

here. We landed very early today. As soon as it was light I woke Ila and she recognized the place.”

Ani had slipped out of the house and now returned with two girls of about her age. J guessed that these were the twins next door that Ila talked about. And a minute later their mother rushed in along with a baby on her hip.

To be honest, continued J, “There were no heroics on my part.”

The mother turned around and said, “That is as may be but you are my greatest hero. I can never ever repay you for what you have done.”

One of the twins piped up. “Why do you talk like that? Are you having a sore throat?”

Before anyone else could respond Ila proudly told her. “It is because he is a man! He grows hair on his face too.”

The silence that greeted this was broken by a new person at the door. “May I enter?” said a lady looking quite purposeful and serious. The three adults immediately became attentive and began to hustle the children into silence. The new comer introduced herself to J. “I am Vrinda the chief counselor of Vaarana. Neila called me to inform me of the happy return of Ila. On behalf of all the

people staying here, I express our heartfelt gratitude to you for restoring Ila to us."

She next turned to Ria. "I suggest that you return to your work." Ria left immediately after expression her gratitude to J once more.

Vrinda next addressed the next door neighbor, "Katie, I would be obliged if you could take your kids and Ani to your house for a short while. I will brief you later." Katie mumbled a word of gratitude and thanks to J as she led the children out.

She addressed J again. "I would like to welcome you to official residence as a guest. To be quite honest that is the only house in the entire Vaarana that has an unoccupied room for temporary use. You see," she added with a smile, "Vaarana has no hotels."

J said quietly. "It is not necessary. Now that my job here is done, I can return to my boat and leave immediately."

But Ila burst into tears. "I do not want J to leave."

"No darling," Vrinda assured. "you see he needs a bed to sleep and there is none here. You spend some time with mama and he will be in my apartment. I promise."

The mother was now visibly distraught. "I have not thanked you enough. I would be extremely distressed if you were to leave," she said to J.

Vrinda turned to J again. "I request you to kindly accept my suggestion. I am quite sure," she added with a smile, "you must be extremely curious of Varana and would like to know more."

J laughed. "I did get a few very interesting tidbits from Ila and I have noticed the response of not only the children but even Katie and Ria to that announcement by Ila."

"I may have felt similarly," said Ila's mother smiling through her tears, "but for my present emotional state."

Vrinda dropped her voice to a whisper indicating Ila. "Can you guess how many residents would be landing here ostensibly to congratulate Ila but in reality to gawk at J? Not that I blame them too much. No one living in Vaarana had ever met a man and for that matter no male had set foot on this island in over ten generations."

Even J was staggered!

Vrinda suggested, "Let us move. Mahi, let everyone know that J is with me and that everyone will eventually have a chance to express their personal gratitude. Ila, you can

come up and meet J again after spending some time with mum and Ani. After all they have not seen you for weeks.”

As they walked out of the apartment, J confessed, “I am extremely curious about this place.”

Vrinda smiled again. “Let us talk over a cup of coffee at my place,” she said.

## IV

As they walked in the corridor, J asked, "Are all residences in this one building? How many people live here anyway?"

Vrinda said, "All buildings in Vaarana are interconnected so in one sense we all live and work in one building. There are about three thousand people including children living here now." They started climbing a staircase and then after a bit more walking reached a door which Vrinda opened and ushered him in, firmly closing the door. Several people had looked curiously at him but Vrinda simply ignored them and walked purposefully along. J became conscious that Vrinda had done the right thing. Otherwise he would have become an exhibit to be stated at.

Once seated over a cup of coffee J looked around curiously. It was an apartment much more spacious than Ila's, but not very ostentatious. Vrinda smiled, "Were you expecting Buckingham Palace?" she asked.

J laughed and asked, "Is this an egalitarian society in addition to being a ladies only one?"

"No. We do have some fairly rich people but while they can display large diamonds they cannot have large mansions, not if they want to live here."

"How long has this enclave existed?" He was stunned by her reply.

"It started early this millennium."

"Is it possible!" he breathed.

"It indeed is and we do have records of the entire saga. We have an audio record of our founder, a woman from India called Tara. The recording was made just before her death."

Vrinda played it on her portable link and J could understand the voice only with some difficulty.

"I am Tara. I received nothing but abuse from men all my life and ran away to this isolated part of the world just to be away from men. I hate men. I have been very happy in the last fifty years, having never met one. I hope that men would never set foot here even after I am gone."

J said, "I am sorry to have intruded."

Vrinda smiled and said, "Never mind. I am sure, even she could have understood the circumstances. But that

introduction was necessary. Not that we the current inhabitants actually hate men. We have never met any as I said. But you have to understand the origins of the place to appreciate why we continue to live the way we do. I will fill in the details,” said Vrinda, “though I assure you everything I tell you is based on actual records or recorded conversations with those ancient residents of this place.

“Tara was born a few years before the second millennium in an extremely poor family in India. The father apparently cursed and abused the mother for having given birth to a girl. He had got an ultrasound done to confirm that the fetus was male. If he learnt that the fetus was female, he would force his wife to have an abortion. Unfortunately, the test gave a wrong result and Tara was born.

“She was possibly genetically strong. She survived the malnutrition, neglect and as she grew up, physical violence at the hands of the father and an elder brother. The mother survived two further abortions of female fetuses and died the third time it was attempted. Tara was ten years old then. Barely into her teens Tara was married off to a man much older than herself. The physical and mental abuse continued. She had a couple of miscarriages which the doctor frankly said were the result of her husband suffering from sexually transmitted diseases. Her husband was promiscuous but refused even to consider medical

treatment. Into this fairly common story of that era, a new development directly led to Vaarana.

"Her father suddenly started having lots of money. Nobody knew the source. Everyone including Tara suspected it was some illegal activity. Tara's husband began to demand that she bring some of that wealth for his personal use. The father refused. The husband refused to accept Tara's plea that her father did not love her and that beating and cursing her would not result in any handouts. The harassment became more and more horrible as the signs of wealth of the father increased and Tara's brother began to spend lavishly. One day the husband doused Tara with kerosene and was threatening her with a lighted matchstick. One moment later she was on fire and screaming and the neighbours finally thought they should intervene. The husband panicked and ran out of the house, directly onto the path of a lorry and died instantly. Tara survived with second degree burns and severe disfigurement.

"Just days later it came to light that the father was caught red-handed, smuggling drugs into a neighbouring Islamic country, where this was a crime that attracted the death penalty. He was duly executed. The son simply ignored both the dead father and the suffering sister. But he had divorced his wife as soon as the money started rolling in.

He hoped to marry someone more beautiful now that he had money. Mere months later, he succumbed to a combination of drugs and alcohol leaving Tara the sole heir to his father's illegal money. Tara very wisely accepted a fraction of it in the form of government bonds as a compromise with the government. It is not exactly known why the government of the day agreed to this. It is speculated that the father acted as a front for a political figure."

After a pause, Vrinda continued her narration, "Tara now slowly began to recreate a life for herself, using the money to get some rudimentary education and more importantly for our story used the newly emerging social media networks to come in contact with some active feminists and other suffering women. However, she wore a Muslim burqa to avoid people's eyes and was extremely unwilling to come out into society and particularly to meet men. A few of the online friends decided to come for a holiday to the island micronation in South Pacific, Diputs, with the idea of having a camping holiday on a totally uninhabited island nearby. Tara was the sponsor. And what you see as Vaarana is that uninhabited, unknown island to which they came. Tara lived here for over fifty years and never left."

J responded, "The really amazing thing is that this settlement has survived for so many generations after that.

One would have expected that this isolated home would have hardly survived the passing of the founder. Even if committed successors were found it should have been a sort of asylum or rest home for abused women. Instead it has become a micronation and that too in an era when national boundaries have been erased globally!"

"That is where several people in succeeding generations changed the original homestead, replied Vrinda, "Sometimes it was sheer luck that helped. Sometimes it was global events which helped inadvertently.

"During the lifetime of Tara however, this was only a retreat for abused ladies. Tara got a satellite phone so that she could stay in touch with her friends and she offered a one way ticket and free accommodation for everyone of them."

"Wonder if there was a stampede!" said J.

"Not likely once you think a bit," responded Vrinda. "It was a one way ticket to complete isolation. But a few people came making their own prior arrangement for the return, and using Tara's offer to subsidize their holidays. However, this was also not an exciting tourist destination even in that era when climate change was just a *theory or conspiracy* for vast numbers and tourism was not yet

condemned universally as environmentally disastrous. So the numbers were few."

"But how did they get along? I mean where were food and other necessities coming from? And there was obviously no regular boat service even from Diputs. For that matter how was the first house built here. Without men as labourers?"

"Once Tara decided to stay here she did not much care for the tents they brought over at the start. Diputs had a population of some ten to twenty thousand then and Tara was very liberal in paying the women to bring supplies or ferry passengers. Once the men realized the benefit, they helped their women to earn. The original house was built by female laborers but was a very simple affair of a few rooms with a roof. Gradually a system of ordering supplies from the satellite phone to be delivered at Diputs and ferried over was set up with liberal commissions for everyone who contributed. So in principle anything the inmates desired could be procured. But since the process was very slow, the demands were modest too.

"You could not get pizza delivered," joked J.

Vrinda smiled and added, "Over the next few years the house had become quite livable. This is an equatorial

climate so with informal clothing, space conditioning was not a huge necessity. Simple rain water harvesting provided drinking water. You could bathe in shallow ponds that collected rain water. Those advantages are still very significant for Vaarana. Then as now, natural rock is used rather than bricks for building.”

There was the sound of a door bell and Vrinda smiled before getting up and opening the door. Four ladies walked in. Vrinda introduced them as her fellow counselors. “The residents elect five of us and each is the chief for one year in rotation,” she explained.

One of them smiled and said, “We were not going to allow Vrinda to keep you to herself!”

“So you have a proper democratic system,” exclaimed J.”

“Well sort of,” replied one of the counselors, “We have an indirect system. Every group of thirty residents elect a representative and the representatives together elect five of us. That works best because we are a small society”

Another counselor grumbled, “We collectively have to decide what we are to do. We have already learnt that he has restored Ila to us and we are grateful but the...”

“I am from Australia, a solitary sailor on a boat--”

"We have been briefed," another member immediately interrupted, "Ria and Neila have inspected the boat. Looks like it was simply at anchor and was not securely fastened to the wharf. Apparently it is totally computer controlled and they could not do much. They have tried to tie it to the wharf with a few ropes but those will not hold even in a strong breeze."

J had to confess, "I myself was sort of marooned on that boat. I cannot control the boat either. Luckily the computer onboard accepted Vaarana as a destination and so I could bring Ila back. I am being told the fascinating story of your place. But I assure you I have no intention to cause problems here. I will leave as soon as you want me to."

"We hardly want to abruptly tell someone who has done a great service to us to leave. Hopefully we can come to an appropriate action plan. Ila for one would be devastated if you left so abruptly and so would her mother and most of us," Vrinda said.

The others murmured their ascent. Then one of them asked Vrinda, "How far in the history have you come? Must be nice for you to indulge in your fancy." She explained to J, "Vrinda is the best historian we had for several generations. She has extensively studied the records and keeps surprising the children with new stories of the past."

"I have just started," said Vrinda as she served refreshments, "I have not even completed the saga of Tara."

She continued her narrative, "Towards the end of that fifty odd years Tara spent here, a special individual joined her. That was Rama. She was also from India. An extremely intelligent woman, she studied at the most elite institutions in India and was extremely technologically savvy. She married her co-student and one would have said that her life was a complete contrast to Tara's. Her parents loved her and while the family was not rich, the father was a senior officer in the government. Rama's was a love marriage. There was no reason to think of her as a target of male abuse but that is where life led her. The husband was not as successful as her and jealousy soon reduced the marriage to a farce.

"Rama thought of herself a modern liberated woman of that era and divorced her husband but that did not end her troubles. In fact they really started intensifying from that point. The husband dedicated his entire life to making her life miserable. Not with abuse and violence which he was well aware would land him in jail but with microscopic troubles, each of which was too small for the courts or police to recognize and investigate. He kept hiring people to sneer at her, to make nasty comments, to send her nasty electronic messages. On one occasion he bribed her

house maid to apply some chemical to her clothes that caused Rama severe allergy without the maid being aware of what she had done.

"Even when investigated by private detectives, it was impossible to get evidence to link the ex-husband with the harassment. And trying to move to an advanced country like USA did not help. He was simply too clever and willing to squander money just so she would suffer one more pin prick. It was the sheer number of these incidents that created the psychological trauma. It was very much like the ancient chinese torture with water drops.

"Finally she found relief in Tara's house. It was too isolated for his tactics and there was no electronic connectivity except through that satellite phone of Tara. Very soon however Rama grew despondent again. She was an extremely intelligent person, wanting to take on intellectually challenging jobs. She was also very close to her parents and really hated being isolated from them. She solved both problems eventually and those solutions form the foundation of Vaarana."

"I am fascinated by your history," commented J, "It almost resembles evolution of life on earth. Here again, a series of random steps seem to have resulted in unplanned complexity."

"That is not completely true," Vrinda said, "But conscious planning came much later. But external contingencies had a huge part in shaping the development.

"Returning to our history, Rama started going out on the boats that brought the supplies. Talking to those people she soon learnt that there was another nearby island where some kind of machine was built several years earlier. It was several hundred kilometers away but she went there and found to her surprise that it was an uninhabited island. But she could figure out what was going on there. That apparently was a point where several optical fibre cables from North America, South America, Singapore, Australia and China were interconnected.

"There were a bank of computers that were used for monitoring the connectivity and the locals from nearby islands told her that very occasionally, once a year or so, visitors would come, spend a few hours or days and then leave again. She also found a huge quantity of unused optical fiber lying around. She first broke into the closed building, which was not very difficult. The physical security was flimsy, Probably no theft was considered likely. She next set to hacking into the system. Finally she managed to attach an extra fibre optic cable to the node and managed to lay a cable all the way to Vaarana with no trained manpower. She used primitive boats for laying the

cable and devised various simple tools to map the seafloor and dredge a trench for laying the cable.

"We, interested in our history always marvel at this accomplishment. It is absolutely unbelievable! And her accomplishments did not stop there," broke in one of the other counselors. "She managed to device a fire wall that we have not still completely understood. It enabled her to link her computer to the world wide web but it was a one way traffic. No one else on the web could know the url of her computer or send her a message. Only when she sent a message which demanded an answer could they reply but could not send a second message using the same address. They had to wait for her to reopen communications.

"It ensured that she could never be located or traced by that ex-husband of hers. She could communicate with her family. Even if he eavesdropped on them and tried to break in, there are indications that he did try to do that, he could not get through to her.

"In one hilarious incident the National Security Agency of the USA tried to break in and learn how she did this. They failed too. But Rama was clever. She fooled them into thinking that this was a glitch and they lost interest in investigating further."

Another counselor broke in, "She employed that connectivity to start commercial work. She even trained people and created avenues for work."

"But that was in the future." broke in Vrinda, "Just as Rama began to succeed, it was becoming obvious that Tara was dying. There were no medical services but Tara did not care. She took to saying that she was going to leave her money to the people living with her at her death. This triggered an increase in the numbers. People started calling in their sisters, cousins or nieces to share what they thought was going to be a fortune.

"When Tara died however, most of them were disappointed. Tara's will specified that the people living in her house should continue to receive funds from her fortune but only as long as they lived there. In other words, she was looking for her house to offer support to the needy even after she was gone. Obviously, there was a lot of heartburn among the recent arrivals who accused their relatives of stupidity or worse.

"Then, as the people started looking closely at the finances, there was consternation. The fortune was quite modest and it would not even cover the travel costs of everyone to return to their native places. On the other hand some of the long time residents had very little human contact with their

families and saw little comfort in returning there in any case. Rama however assured everyone that they could continue to survive and even flourish."

# V

One of the counselors broke in. "Let us take a break. I think J would like a little bit of fresh air and he would enjoy the view from your observation platform."

"Why not say that you would enjoy it?" another one teased.

Vrinda explained to J, "One of my predecessors in a bit of megalomania paid out her own private money to build that raised platform. From there you can see the whole of Vaarana. Any how, let us go."

They all climbed a couple of staircases from within the apartment to reach a terrace about seven stories high. There was a fresh breeze, smell of the sea and then the minute size of the place hit J. There was one building, more correctly a series of buildings joined to one another and enclosing a roughly circular central open space. Nothing was more than three or four stories in height. There were a few small isolated buildings. There was the sea on three sides and a curved horizon of low mountains which did not look natural to him.

The central open space of the building was a kind of recreational area. He could see basketball courts, a couple of tennis courts, walking paths, swings and slides for children and so on. On the outside of the building was once again recreational green area leading to the rather wide sandy beach. In one direction he could see the pipeline. At the shore end of the pipeline was one of the isolated buildings. At the other end of the pipeline was the wharf and his boat was visible. Two of the other isolated buildings were extremely close to the hills, one at each end. The entire roof of the circular building was covered with solar panels. Between the hills and the building were a series of small ponds. And that was it!

He was frankly staggered. "Forget about how you survived over the years, how do you survive now?" he asked.

The five counselors looked oddly at him. Then one of them replied. "Solar electricity supplemented by compressed natural gas is the energy source. That wharf is for importing gas as required. No air conditioners, no cars, no elevators. The buildings are designed to provide a draft of natural air for cooling. Every place is within easy walking distance. The staircases have ramps. The elderly and handicapped use battery powered wheelchairs. No high rise buildings."

She pointed to one of the building at the edge of the hill. "That is a desalination plant. It supplements rainwater harvesting and recycling." Pointing to the building at the other end of the hills she said. "All water from waste is recycled. Organic waste is converted to fertilizer. Combustible waste is burnt to partly provide the energy needed to convert the remaining waste to solid blocks in that plant. The blocks form the upper layers of those hills. The original volcanic mountain was mined for granite to build. We still do some mining under the hills but also use the blocks from waste for building."

J immediately understood why the hills looked odd. Despite being covered with both trees and shrubs to a large extent, the hills looked more like terraces built by humans. "You also seem to place a lot of those solid stones in the sea. I noticed this morning. They made the water movement at ebb tide rather fast. Probably the reason why Ila was swept out to sea."

Vrinda replied. "Those blocks are compressed at high temperature and are ceramic. No risk of contaminating the water. We are aware that the sea level is expected to raise even further due to global warming. Those blocks have been placed in the sea incase we need to eventually create a dyke as a barrier."

"Of course, the rest of the island is quite a bit higher but losing the beach could be very troublesome," piped up another counselor, "So we hope to maintain a lower sea level within the lagoon and retain our beach. The ponds you see there are our primary source of food. A combination of genetically modified algae harvesting, and fish farming. Some robotic sea fishing is also undertaken. Of course the residents can and do import delicacies. Once again the ships unload at the same wharf. But as you can guess we are mostly self sufficient."

"Why do we need to import delicacies when our food service can deliver more than a million items on the menu?" asked one of the counselors who was visibly a foodie.

J was amused, "What do you really mean by a million choices?"

"I really mean a million choices," the foodie replied, "Over the years our scientists have analyzed the sensory perceptions, taste smell and texture that define specific food items, not merely naturally occurring fruits or meat but cooked dishes from all over the world. So now we have the ability to prepare using appropriate carbohydrates, amino acids and other molecules any dish you may wish for. We can serve caviar and challenge the most discriminating gourmet to realize how it has been prepared.

For the residents of Vaarana, who prefer to cook by themselves, we supply ingredients and instructions."

"But that is not the real thing," argued J.

"Is that rational to make that claim? It is like arguing that a masterpiece of art is more valuable than a replica which is visually indistinguishable from it. Most of us are realists here. We think such claims are simply efforts to seek higher prices for articles in limited supply. So yes, you can argue that our *artificial* food is inferior but most residents here do not care."

"I agree that your view is entirely rational. And we apply the same logic in decrying physical tourism and insisting that virtual reality of distant lands is a morally superior option." J returned to carefully looking at the scene before him. "What do you do?" he asked curiously, "If you need a spare part for the desalination plant or a solar panel needs replacement?"

"The solar panels and much of our sophisticated electronic chips, we have no choice but to import. For other things we try to get along with 3D printing. The replacements are not as efficient but we manage. In due course we reach the ship of Theseus situation. So many parts have been replaced that one wonders if it is still the original unit that has been repaired or it is to be thought of as entirely new."

"The technologies you are talking about have all been with us for several centuries. Are you able to survive just because you use old technology, very much like several stone age tribes coexisted with the twentieth century countries that could land a man on the moon?".

Vrinda broke in,"Most of those stone age societies survived purely because the others protected them. Some *civilized* individuals felt guilty because their ancestors decimated other primitive societies during industrial revolution and colonization. Sociologists wanted the remaining primitive societies protected to study them. A few countries extracted tourist revenue from visitors who gawked at them. We have survived without such considerations."

"It is not correct," broke in another "To think that we are ignorant of advances in technology. We use contemporary robotics. That is why we survive in the first place and it is all due to Rama."

Before she could go any further, Vrinda started talking on her mobile link and smiled. She told J, "Ila is looking for you. Her mother called. She is suspecting that you have left."

One of the others suggested, "Why don't you ask Ila and her mother to join us here?"

Vrinda nodded her head in agreement, said something softly into the phone and disconnected. "I will go down and bring them up she said. Maybe you could brief J about our robotics."

The person who clearly knew robotics intimately smiled and continued. "Rama as we told you convinced others that despite the limited financial contribution from Tara's estate, they could survive. She trained some of the younger residents in information technology as it was known in that era and secured a couple of work contracts. That helped in two ways. First there some money earned. More importantly however, people were fruitfully occupied. That really reduced the stress all round. Then Rama really delivered something sensational. She announced that she was going to build a second house and without depending on any labor from Diputs. She built a series of robots. Each specialized in one activity associated with house building.

"She patented some of her ideas and earned royalties. She got the robots to do everything. In that era, robots were well known. But they were not sophisticated enough for some jobs, which required highly trained humans, surgeons for example. For other low end jobs, human labor was cheaper. Rama was the force behind the transformation to today's world, where robots are cheap enough for the smallest jobs and capable enough for the most precise.

"She also instructed many of the others in how to control, program and build robots themselves. Even now, the history of robotics describes the contributions made by Rama."

Another counselor sought J's attention, "Vrinda would have wanted to tell you, the house on the left is the one Rama built. It has been preserved to a large extent."

J looked down. It was smaller than the others and was also the only two storey house in the entire ring shaped structure.

The counselor continued her comments about robots, "Rama is really the goddess of Vaarana. We still use the same approach to survive. We build robots to relieve us of drudgery. We earn by way of intellectual property rights and work outsourced to us by the rest of the world. We use the digital connection with a firewall as conceived by her to be largely independent of the rest of the world. To complete the picture, under the complete ring like building is a common basement where the robots are located. They perform all jobs that we assign to them."

J joked, "Well there is a possible revolution brewing there."

The others duly laughed but one of them responded, "As the history of mankind has shown, a superlatively strong

robot, created to mimic the unpredictable human mind is trivial in conceptualization. Arguments based on Turing test, of whether such a robot should be considered a sentient being are for us at Vaarana completely insane.”

J was confused, “What is Turing?”

“Oh!” continued the speaker, “A twentieth century scientist raised that conundrum. You place a robot in one closed room and have a human in another. You communicate with both using by texting or other electronic means. If you cannot tell which is robot and which is human, would you agree that the robot was a sentient being?”

“I think the question is irrelevant. If humans are foolish enough to build dangerous robots they deserve the destruction that can ensue. But we at Vaarana do not need a central authority to proclaim that this is prohibited and police us to ensure obedience.”

The robotic expert broke in, “The robots we make are for our assistance, They are extremely capable and technically advanced but for specific jobs we have in mind. We routinely recycle them as necessary.”

Broke in another, “But can you honestly say that most humans are superior to the most basic robots? For that matter the record of violence unleashed on fellow humans

in the past by despotic individuals is before us. Have you any reason to think that the revolution by the autonomous robots will be any worse?"

J threw up his hands and said, "Please! I was just joking."

"But seriously, the more I see this place the more amazed I am. This place seems to have achieved the Greek ideal of a golden mean and done that almost effortlessly. There was no reason why human societies have not organized themselves on this pattern before. The technology required has been with us for so long!"

One of the counselors who had been silent throughout the conversation now said in a quiet voice. "You see, organizing a human society on a rational basis is not a problem that can be solved by technology. Nor by organized, congregational religions. The answer you seek is not a matter of technology. Just as an example, while robots can do jobs, here at Vaarana we encourage and assist individuals to do a job themselves rather than use robots. The difference with the rest of the world is social organization not technology.

"The representatives have power to use common funds that is how we refer to tax revenue, for use of individuals other than their own family. This is the equivalent of so

called social safety net in the rest of the world. This is to help those who are not earning enough or those who cannot earn by themselves or those without family support. But it is entirely a discretionary. We view this support as the privilege of the society not as a right of the individual. That is once again the difference.”

“So you have social delinquency too,” commented J.

“Sure. Human nature is on an average the same everywhere.”

“But how would you prevent a representative cheating, being indifferent or biased?”

“Well! It is a group of thirty people that elected him in the first place. How difficult is it for them to get together and accost him or change him if so required?”

“What if the thirty people form a cabal?”

“Well, what are the rest of us here for? The counselor ordinarily spends for common benefit, creating infrastructure and so on. The counselor can also confiscate part or all of the wealth of such a cabal. There are checks and balances at each stage, only no written constitution and no so called fundamental rights. Merely a covenant that every adult is an equal party for all decisions

and that every adult can ask for a revision of any decision and will not be punished for asking.

“The problem with the rest of the world is the persistent demand that every law be objective and universally fair. We think this is silly. It is not possible to have a law that does not have negative consequences. Making a law extremely precise only encourages individuals to use their ingenuity to find ways to circumvent it. The more complicated the law the more opportunities to do so.”

Vrinda came up with Ila and her mother and the conversation stopped. Ila launched herself at J, hugged him and said. “I am so happy. I was afraid you had left.”

“But darling,” smiled J, “Now that you have mummy you should not be afraid.”

“Yes. I told mamma, I am sorry went in the pipes where she asked me not to go.”

“And was mamma angry?”

“No. She said not to do it again. But she cried a lot.”

“Well darling we cry when we're unhappy but we also cry when we are very very happy.”

Ila had a grand time being petted by the counselors while the mother tried to express her gratitude to J. "I can never ever forget your help. I was so sad that it was all my fault for losing sight of her she said. I really do not know what I can do or say. Words seem so inadequate."

"I can understand," replied J, "Not that I had done something heroic. It was sheer chance that Ila floated into my path before it was too late and sheer luck again that the life preserver and swimsuit combo had a reference to this place which that computer on the boat accepted. I am very happy that you and Ila are together again. I know how sad it is to lose someone you love. Particularly under circumstances like this."

"I hope we will have some kind of a felicitation," said one of the counselors.

"And I hope you don't" replied J smiling, "Please do not worry about anything of that sort. Your happiness is enough."

Ila looked around and started getting a bit afraid. Clearly she was not used to heights. So everyone returned to Vrinda's apartments where she had arranged a buffet lunch. Talk about food, tastes and preferences occupied everyone till slowly everyone took their leave leaving Vrinda and J to continue their talk about the history of Vaarana.

## VI

As J and Vrinda settled down for continuing their talk, she smiled and said, "My fellow counselors have quietly left your future course of action to yourself. And I agreed that after you learn about our history and the current society you can take an appropriate decision."

J smiled and asked, "One of them seems to be a great admirer of Rama."

"Yes. After her death, quite a few people tried to portray her as the feminist Newton or Einstein. Of course that is biased propaganda. Rama actually lived and worked here for very few years. The work she did in that extremely short period is certainly phenomenal and as it turned out critical for our survival. However, It is not fundamental to science.

"In any case, just as she got her house completed, she began to become disoriented for extended spells. She decided to go back to her parents for proper medical treatment. There she was diagnosed with an extremely virulent form of cancer and died within weeks. It led to

chaos here obviously. People felt that with Rama following Tara, there was nothing to look forward to here.

"The most important issue for most people was financial sustainability. Rama's parents were extremely generous. They simply allowed the residents here to use her money and future royalties as they had been doing before. She was an only child and they were devastated by her sudden death. They did not want her money. They felt grateful to the place where she was so happy for a few years after her earlier traumatic life. But even with plenty of money, this place would certainly have not survived in the long run. Amba who arrived together with Rama was responsible for sustaining the place and transforming it into the present society.

"Amba's early life had a lot in common with Tara's. She was born in an extremely poor family in a small village of tribals in central India. She never shared details of her early life with anyone except to confirm that the family was extremely poor, that she was married when she was sixteen, had two children before twenty and that her husband died in an accident shortly thereafter. After the death of her husband she single handedly brought up her son and daughter. She was totally uneducated and worked as a manual laborer but insisted that her children get a proper education. She herself learnt from the free books

they got in a government school. She encouraged them to study by themselves in an environment where the teachers were indifferent and incompetent.

*"She would say later, "Anyone who has learnt to read the alphabet can read and understand any book. It just means you read it twenty times instead of once. It just means you read the elementary books first before you read the difficult ones. The teacher merely makes you lazy."* She was phenomenally creative at preparing food as the residents learnt later. She managed, nobody knows how, to send her children to college. She was extremely patient in later life too."

"Must have learnt from prying out government assistance from indifferent, lazy government bureaucrats," J added. "Most certainly it would have taken superhuman patience to extract benefits from early twenty first century Indian bureaucracy, when everything was provided on paper and nothing reached the intended beneficiaries."

Vrinda continued her narrative, "Anyhow she managed to get the children into college. The boy completed college education, got a job and married a college sweetheart. He possibly neglected his mother but once again she never complained about that to anyone. Infact she never complained about anyone or anything; not about her earlier

life in India nor about her prolonged stay here. Sadly, just a couple of years after his marriage, the son contracted drug resistant tuberculosis and died. His wife remarried after an year or so and Amba lost contact with the daughter in law as well as the grandson.

"The daughter in the meantime became a raving beauty who jumped into showbiz. Amba found herself unable to accommodate to her sexual promiscuity, drugs and decadent extravagance. The daughter offered to pay for her stay in an old age home but Amba was less than fifty years old and not very much interested. She was one of the people who used Tara's offer of a one way ticket to this place with an idea of returning after a short stay. But she found herself quite at home and stayed here forever. She like Tara lived for more than fifty years here and that was the real momentous period in our history.

"For several years after the passing away of Rama, this place flourished but purely as a pilgrimage center for feminists. The recording you heard of Tara was shared endlessly on social media and it sort of became a badge of honor for those belonging for feminist movements of all varieties to come here. The death of Rama and her posthumous fame as a female scientist not given recognition in the male dominated world became an added attraction. It was purely the remoteness that prevented the

place being swamped. There was no airport even in Diputs and the final leg of the journey was a fairly long ride in a rickety manually handled sailing boat.

"The robots that Rama developed for building her home became mere museum pieces. The only use made of the digital link was to order materials to be delivered to Diputs to be ferried over here. The visitors were more than willing to donate funds for upkeep and there was no reason to work for maintaining an effectively luxurious standard of living.

"That I can very well understand. That is what I would have expected," said a smiling J.

"There was only one event from that era that is relevant for the future development of our society. One of the feminists from USA named Dora decided that a child conceived and born here would become a champion of feminism. So she landed here with a sperm bank in tow."

J laughed out aloud, "Wonder, she did not think of cloning."

"Apparently she did, but there were no facilities here," said Vrinda wryly.

"Of course, the humanitarian issues with human cloning have made it a bit unacceptable even now," said J. "There

are risks of genetic defects and abnormalities that would be apparent only post birth. Some of the cloned children took both the doctors responsible for their birth and the genetic parents to court, not only for financial compensation but also willfully and knowingly causing hardship to them. Or atleast so I heard," he added.

"Yes. That more or less prompted most contemporary people to give cloning a pass," said Vrinda. "Dora did become pregnant but then panicked at the thought of giving birth without medical facilities. She rushed back to her country. But that solar powered refrigerated sperm bank was left behind and had a role in subsequent history.

"Amber lived through this whole period with docility and was scarcely visible. For one thing she was quite a religious person and most people even here looked down upon region. Then again she did not share the feminist attitude of blaming men and patriarchy for everything. That isolated her even more.

"Quite surprising that she suffered, arguably not as much as the other lady, Tara, but her reaction was so different," mused J.

Vrinda continued without a comment. "Roughly ten years after the death of Rama a huge cyclonic storm destroyed

Diputs completely. The residents here had no idea. They experienced a few days of stormy weather that was not entirely unexpected for that season of the year. Both visitors and the long term residents just relaxed through the stormy weather. The stormy weather receded. But to the consternation of the long term residents, no boats appeared bringing supplies. There were no new visitors and no transport for the short term visitors to leave either.

"In a few days, food in particular became very scarce. When tourism became the main economy, individuals had started to import even bottled mineral water. Everyone lost the habit of simple living that was the hall mark if the early years with Tara. There were tears, regrets, lamentations, accusations of theft and fisticuffs in plenty.

"Into this chaos, Amba stepped in as a saviour. She showed the younger people how to dig a shallow well on the beach to get drinking water. She persuaded them to fish and catch crabs. She cooked for them. She showed them how to collect seaweed for food. This held off starvation but did nothing to console the residents. No one knew what had happened."

"Obviously there were no boats here, let alone people capable of sailing them, to investigate," J shrewdly observed.

"Exactly," replied Vrinda. "The data link was available but it could give little news regarding the micronation. It was weeks before the rest of the world managed to physically inspect Diputs and realize that only a few people had survived the superstorm. The survivors were promptly taken off the island. There was a brief news interest and then the world forgot about it. No one knew nor cared about the little abode of women.

"As the people learnt of this, there was complete despondency. An attempt was made to inform the supplier of goods and through him the authorities with a plea to evacuate the marooned ladies. But that failed. The authorities were unable to physically locate the source of this information and concluded that this was a hoax. The very confidentiality that Rama built as security now became a liability."

"There must have been plenty of railing at Rama," commented J. "I can well appreciate how devastating that news must have been. It is really a miracle that the society survived."

"It was all Amba's doing. She persuaded the depressed residents that all was not lost. She encouraged the younger set to study and understand what Rama did. She made them work out their exact physical location and find a

supplier to deliver supplies to that point with a promise of offloading at sea. Some suppliers actually duped and cheated them after taking the money but she ensured that the effort was not given up. Then she inspired them to build a small robotic boat that could collect supplies since there is no harbor and ships cannot come too close to this island. All this took almost a year of effort.”

“The very idea of keeping a group of despondent individuals motivated for a year is mind boggling,” said J, “she must have been an amazing leader of men. Well,” he bit his tongue and smiled.

Vrinda laughed, “Yes the idioms have lasted so long despite all efforts of political correctness,” she said.

“I am afraid I am the guilty party. Too much reading of ancient literature,” J replied.

“Any how, finally a supply ship came and by that time the people got divided into two groups. Many of the old time residents were willing to follow Amba and stay for some more time. They saw no reason to return. They had long before lost all personal contacts with their relatives and friends.

“Some of the young ones who succeeded in breaking through under the guidance of Amba were willing to try and

see what more they can accomplish. The rest thought of nothing but escape from the prison. They came to hate the rest of the people as much as the minimalist life they had been leading for an year.

"Finally, the great day arrived. There were supplies and the crew was stunned. The supply ship agreed to become a rescue vessel with some hefty payment and with difficulty managed to take away those that wanted to leave.

"Unfortunately for us historians, there is no record of that ship having reached anywhere nor of any of those rescued returning to the civilization as they so desperately wanted to. No one certainly contacted us again."

"Had the ship capsized without even sending an SOS? But there must have been some record of a missing ship."

"No records."

"It is not known this was due to an accident or whether the ship was caught in a crossfire between some warring parties? There were some wars in this part of the world in that period. Or perhaps pirates; there were some of those too in that era. It is even possible that some totalitarian government imprisoned both the crew and passengers. The story they told would have been scarcely believable."

Vrinda smiled at these speculations. "A more mundane possibility is that the ship did get through. But those who returned were so bitter about this place and its remaining residents that they simply resolved not to allow any memory of this place to survive and possibly help those who stayed behind. The fact remains that the residents here were left in isolation. The feminist pilgrimage ended and in some feminist writings, it is recorded that this place of feminist interest was also lost along with Diputs." Vrinda took a deep breath, "Except for the crew of ships who were never allowed to come on land, you are the first visitor since."

## VII

"One can understand the old people who possibly were here for decades choosing to stay back, once it was possible to import necessities of life. They had probably nothing waiting for them on the other side either. But why did the youngsters decide to stay?" wondered J.

"It seems to be mostly the personal impact of Amba," Vrinda said and then smiled. "To be honest, it seems a few people were unwilling to share the boat with the second group. They felt that they could get a second relief ship very easily now that the mechanism was in place.

"There was extreme hostility on both sides. Those who stayed behind felt that those who left behaved like spoiled brats and did not share in the effort made to keep this place going and establishing the system for relief. Those who left were equally bitter about their forced, extended stay in primitive conditions.

"But Amba was the real cause. There were about twenty youngsters who looked at her as a saintly mother who was responsible for keeping them sane in the first place and then slowly building their capabilities for the eventual success. They were most reluctant to go back without her. But Amba very wisely pointed out that even if she returned with them the bonds will be broken since there is no prospect of establishing a common home for all of them outside this island.

"But more importantly, over the one year under her stewardship, the group had become some kind of a Socratic society, discussing everything in life and creating a philosophical point of view that was strongly opposed to the militant feminist agenda of the rest.

"We the historians feel certain that this philosophical schism was a great factor in the hostility between the two groups. In any case the group of youngsters were too devoted to Amba and her philosophical lessons to abandon her."

"Interesting. But you had said she did not have much formal education. Yet she managed to develop a philosophy that impressed the others who must have had some formal education. Surely that was necessary? For them to have done all the computer programming and

robotic development necessary or recreating the commercial link.”

“Sure. Some of those women were graduates of computer engineering. As I said before, there are extensive records of the entire history of this place and those philosophical discussions were very carefully recorded. Amba was very simple that way. She apparently always spoke from her experience and extrapolated from there. She herself practiced certain Hindu rituals, rather strictly.”

“That must have irked some of the others who were bound to be atheists,” said J.

“Yes. and even more importantly they were to some extent feminists. Amba explained that ritualistic practice is important but not the rituals themselves. She insisted that the practice is necessary for physical and mental resilience. It is simply impossible she pointed out for an individual to come up with a random practice and stick to it. That is where a spirit of the community becomes necessary. *“We need the others too”* she said. The shared emotions permit us to share belief in rituals.

“That some of her own practices emerged from a patriarchal society did not bother her. She said, *“What counts is my practice. It is always the individual who is responsible for his acts. There is no point in accusing*

*groups and that too groups who are not physically present among us."*

J smiled, "That would have been a big problem for the feminists."

"Apparently it was a huge problem for those young disciples too. It was slowly over the course of that year in isolation that they came to agree with Amba. Amba also insisted that love is a quality of action and not something that exists independent of it. She refused to agree that the commonly used term, falling in love has any meaning. "*If you love me*", she argued, "*that love must be felt by the way you do things for me or with me. Otherwise these are silly useless words without any meaning.*" Likewise she was extremely scathing about claims of loving millions of people let alone half the world population as the feminists claim to. That was another great source of friction. She insisted that we can have human relationships with a small number of people and can and should help them. But talking about serving humanity left her amused."

"She must have stumbled into the rule that the anthropologist of the twentieth century who studied sizes of monkey groups identified. Dunbar wasn't it?" asked J, "He concluded that the ideal size of a human group was a few dozens."

"Amber was not so specific or clear. Her's was a kind of homespun philosophy. She insisted that everyone had to perform some physical activity in a spirit of service. Above all else she was very clear that the greatest contribution from an individual is towards the succeeding generations. Taking care of children was to her the holiest responsibility and a true justification of anyone's existence."

"Surprising," said J, "when you consider that her own children did not reward her for her efforts. You seemed to say they were most indifferent or negligent."

"Her response is on record. She explicitly said, "*Children discharge their debt to their parents by taking care of their own children not by caring for aged parents.*" and she was not impressed by people trying to justify their existence by way of intellectual accomplishments much less organizing societies or making rules.

"She insisted that there is only one thing that is in short supply namely time. Everyone gets only twenty four hours. So helping people individually, spending one's own listed supply is much more meritorious than pretending to help the whole of humanity.

"In a similar vein she insisted that improving the environment of a local region is more important than

making grandiose plans that seldom work and often have extremely unpleasant unforeseeable consequences. She was instinctively disinclined to believe that complex problems like child rearing or environmental protection have scientifically validated solutions."

J nodded his head in agreement, "I had read some obscure writings of that era, in which the limitations of being overtly scientific have been discussed. The writer argued that it is not fair to think of science as unitary body of knowledge. While fundamental physics cannot be challenged due to the mysterious fact that nature is itself mathematical, most other scientific conclusions are based on statistical comparison of groups. In comparing groups, more precise scientific investigation would possibly lead you to unambiguous scientific conclusions. But the utility of that conclusion itself is quite limited. Ultimately, in matters of relevance to human life, the odds of succeeding despite rejecting the so called scientific conclusion are only marginally worse than even.

"Surprisingly both the enigma of why nature is mathematical and the dichotomy between a classical theory of gravity and a quantum theory of everything else has not been resolved even today. The contemporary truce between the literalist rurals, the urban drifters and the minuscule *specials* has still not persuaded the world to

accept such conclusions regarding the limited utility of science. Any compromise is seen as a concession to the literalists and the start of a slippery slope to their world view."

Vrinda said, it is surprising that you should have run into those writings. "Apparently, one of the younger set attached to Amba was ambiguous about her feminist views thanks to exposure to this same obscure philosopher scientist. Ultimately, she was struck by how closely the instinctive conclusions of Amba reflected those more precise arguments and set about to create a sort of universal philosophical guidelines for life itself.

"The participants of the Socratic conversations immediately realized that the prospects of living by these tenets of accepting both religious practice and scientific conclusions as useful but approximate guides to life is more likely in this isolated community rather than in the rest of the world.

"That ultimately was a major intellectual reason for the younger disciples of Amba choosing to stay back to add to the emotional attachment with her and the confidence that physically comfortable life can be accomplished here. That started the creation of Vaarana by the generations that followed leading to where we are today."

J took a deep breath, "I can see the reflection of that philosophy in what one of your fellow counselors had told me earlier when we were on the terrace. About the flexible powers granted to the representatives and counselors without any detailed enumeration of rights in a constitution. You seem to have accomplished what my parents always wanted, a balance between the body, the mind and the intellect. You accept religion but are not literalist as a large segment outside is. You accept science but without being dogmatic about it. More importantly you have managed to do so without dividing yourself into the useful *specials* and the purposeless existence of the urbans."

The conversation was interrupted by the door chime and and when Vrinda opened the door, one of the counselors, the one who was most silent during the earlier interaction entered. She appeared to be worried about something and hesitantly asked Vrinda, "Can you give me a few minutes in private?"

The two of them went into another room leaving J wondering anew at the peculiar twists and turns that led to the creation of this enclave. Then suddenly the two of them returned. Vrinda was smiling but the second person still had a troubled look. In fact she appeared more sullen and disturbed now. Vrinda spoke up, "Well my friend Diva has a big worry. I was sort of anticipating this since morning.

Slowly people have realized that your presence here is an unresolvable problem. On one hand we cannot have you here on any kind of permanent or semi permanent basis, primarily for your own sake. You will not enjoy being a lone man among this community. And yes, there could be some reservations on this side too. So this morning everyone conceded that you will depart at your own convenience without us being ungrateful and mannerless. But now suddenly Diva has woken to the fact that we have a huge risk. You can now act as a guide for the curious to come and gawk at us."

"Or", broke in Diva, "Cause the powers that be, to force us to conform to the ways of the rest of the world. You could be not merely the first visitor to Vaarana in many generations, you could be the first one who could return to Vaarana after having left from here. Many of our suppliers know our latitude and longitude but you are the only one who also knows what is actually here. We are now totally in your power."

Wryly J commented, "So what is the verdict? Imprisonment or execution?"

Both Vrinda and Diva were startled to say the least. Then Vrinda recovered and said stiffly, "We in Vaarana would never do anything remotely like that. We have a heritage

that we take seriously. There has been no violence here since the start, unless you count the slight frictions that erupted during the isolation immediately after Diputs was destroyed."

J said, "I am sorry for making that comment. But you have nothing to worry. I really am very happy to see a flourishing little place like this. It is almost like seeing a fresh blooming flower in the middle of a vast desert. The last thing I would want to do is in any way contribute to any unhappiness here. More than once in my life I have felt that I was a misfit in the world. So I have no motivation to act either as a tourist guide or as a military scout for it. Of course I am aware that my presence here would be mutually irksome for practical reasons despite the feelings of gratitude on your side, so I shall depart as soon as possible. Only I wanted to satisfy my curiosity."

"I was hoping that you would do something more," said Vrinda, "Unlike Diva and perhaps many others here I have a different outlook. In a way you are a possible solution to a problem I became aware of as a historian. Vaarana is too small. We have survived quite a few storms since the destruction of Diputs thanks to superior organization and technology but that is no guarantee of safety for ever. I would hate Vaarana to join the many small island cultures that have gone extinct to be studied by archaeologists. I

always was worried that our own insularity is a liability in that our human experience is not available for others to draw upon. As Amba used to say "*Providing our wisdom to succeeding generations is also an important goal of our lives.*" So while I certainly would not want to be a zoo exhibit I do want us to be a model and for the rest of the world to文明ize themselves on our pattern.

"In other words," said J, "you are no Shangri La, waiting for the rest of the world to devour each other and inherit the world."

Vrinda was confused but Diva smiled and said "I have read that novel. James Hilton isn't it? They kidnap people to increase their numbers while they wait. But Vrinda wants us to send people around on a civilization mission. My worries remain," she sighed.

"I am not surprised" said J to Diva, "you have to trust me on such a vital matter and then you hardly know me."

Then he turned to Vrinda. "I am not sure I have the capability to accomplish what you are hoping for. It has been obvious to me that the technology required for a society like this is very simple. Even financial requirements to start a project like this will be quite modest. Not that I have that kind of money he added but any individual billionaire could easily create the infrastructure."

Vrinda wryly commented, "I will be repeating a stale moral axiom when I say money cannot buy many things and I certainly do not think money would enable you to make a Vaarana."

"I agree" said J, the key is the organization of the society and the relationships between individuals. To quote another old moral maxim, "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*". Great. But in my opinion insufficient in practice. Irrespective of whether I really act as a messiah for the rest of the world, I am curious about some of your practices. And to ask the hard question first, do you think this being a female only society a necessary requirement? And how has this emerged to be one in the first place? Did you name this place Vaarana because an elephant is called Vaarana in Sanskrit and like this place, elephants are a matriarchal society?"

Vrinda and Diva both were surprised. "None of us saw that connection. Actually Vaarana was the name given by the group with Amba. It is an acronym for validating a rational nation."

## VIII

Vrinda continued her narration of the history of Vaarana. "Once the feminists had left, the remainder started to look at the practical problems they faced in their dream to convert their philosophical vision into a sustaining culture. The first problem obviously was reproduction. They decided to use the same means as Dora, who had left her sperm bank behind when she hastily left after her own conception. The idea caught fire and everyone who was not actually past menopause wanted to participate."

"What about medical support?" exclaimed J.

Vrinda laughed. "To begin with many of the older ladies were from financially poor sections of the society. Some of them had given birth themselves without medical assistance and most had helped others in the same predicament. Then the digital connection for commercial transactions was rapidly fine tuned so that in a few months, importing medicines and equipment had become routine. Further, by that time, online medical advice and information

had become available even if they did not quite reach the current situation of robotic medical services. All in all, the pioneers felt confident and an year or so later the reality stuck them dumb.

“There were only baby girls. To be sure, almost everyone was healthy and thriving but they were all female. It did not need much intelligence to guess that Dora’s feminism had taken a hand in this state of affairs. Actually, sorting sperm based on sex was routine in the twentieth century dairy industry which preferred cows. Sorting techniques were also developed to identify and avoid genetic defects for in vitro fertilization procedures, the test tube babies as they were then called. Everyone knew that this could be used for sexual selection and many countries had ethical and legal restrictions on that practice. When Dora lugged along her sperm bank, she had managed to get the sorting done.”

J was amused. “Looks like the history of Vaarana is a series of random events.”

“Just like Evolution,” put in Diva, “there was no “reason” for the evolution of any specific species least of all humans however much the devout may protest.”

Vrinda continued, “Initially, this was apparently greeted with hilarity but soon there was serious introspection.”

"The old lady, Amba must have been dismayed."

"Apparently not! She was the one person who simply shrugged her shoulders and accepted it as God's dictate. There was some suggestion to correct this imbalance. But the problems were obvious. Healthy human sperm in a refrigerated container was not something that could be ordered online! And at least some of the women inspired perhaps by their earlier feminist philosophy saw no reason why they should care. After all they argued, some societies in the past practiced female infanticide and here they were, worrying about something they were not morally responsible for! All in all, the female population began to grow.

"Eventually we have established a biological research laboratory to have a justifiable reason for importing human sperm cells. We have found that sperm can be stored for up to ten years under proper refrigeration. But it took several years and the population was significantly higher by then. That raised the second objection to altering the state of affairs which has persisted to this day. How? Introducing one male into this community is possibly a call for major disturbance."

J laughed outright, "Yes," he said, almost from the first minute I realized that!"

"And you are an adult. Think of having a single male baby in this community. The psychological problems both for him and the rest! And the complications once he grows to be an adult!" exclaimed Diva.

"Yes this is a discussion we have once every generation or so. As Vaarana has survived longer and longer, the call for change of the situation have become more muted. Why tinker with success is another argument in favor of status quo. But, we do not think," Vrinda said to J, "That an all feminine population is necessary for implementing the philosophy which guides Vaarana and that is all the answer we can give to your question."

"But" said J and then hesitated. He paused and was visibly trying to say something very precisely. "How about interpersonal relationships? I mean... " Once again he stopped.

Both Diva and Vrinda laughed. "No need to be so cautious and circumspect. We understand what you are driving at. We at Vaarana are entirely liberated. The population, being all female, has no doubt only limited options for experimenting with their sexuality," said Vrinda.

"Docile robotic partners are available! In many ways better than males", put in Diva mischievously. "So we have some

who go that way, some who live together as friends, others who choose a Lesbian relationship."

"And what was the reaction of Amba? I am curious. She was a traditional person and all this *unnatural*..."

Actually we think, and Amba herself said, "*Nothing a human being does is natural. It's quite natural for a tigress to abandon her litter or even eat them*" she said. Human actions are no doubt constrained by physics. They are also influenced by the earlier experiences in life."

"Constraining the instincts may lead to repression" said J.

"Giving them a free rein could lead to depression too. A twentieth century biologist showed that physics sets limits on size of living beings. But to identify neurological limits to human behaviour is very poor science. "*Man likes both novelty and stability*", said Amba. "*It is for each person to see what the circumstances permit and create a balance between the two.*"

"There may be some who are not satisfied with the limitations imposed by the circumstance here. I mean it being a female only society," observed J.

"Sure thing," said Diva "and there are no border controls. They are free to leave and I must say some do so choose."

"No one has returned though. We do not know why," put in Vrinda. "Maybe some want to come back but can't. That was why Diva was so concerned about you."

"But you do have commercial contacts with the rest of the world" objected J.

"But no passenger ferry," smiled Diva, "So somehow the individual who has left will have to find who is shipping the next lot of supplies and negotiate with them. Or else succeed in building an independent over the water transport such as the one you have."

"Not an easy proposition," admitted J. "It was pure chance that put me on that boat all alone."

"As technology has advanced, our requirement for supplies from the rest of the world have become quite modest. Actually we have a fairly substantial credit balance."

"Your earnings I suppose are all from intellectual property."

"If you are referring to individual earnings, yes. There is only limited scope for individuals to sell their services on the island. That once again should not be a surprise to you. Even in the rest of the world, physical trade has been on the decline."

"Yes. Partly due to environmental concerns. But it is now simpler to manufacture anything you need on site, thanks to molecular assembly and robotics which have supplemented 3D printing of the earlier era," said J. "What about public finances. Do you collect taxes?"

"We have a wealth tax which we feel is more appropriate. With an income tax richer individuals tend to invest for the long term and pay little tax."

"But economists would argue that investment is necessary for wealth generation."

"It would have been better for the reputation of economics as a science if they had conceded that a balanced budget is compulsory," said Diva. "I see no reason why I should pay for the debts of my mother or the government of her generation."

"Whether economists approve or not, it is a rule in Vaarana. In earlier generations occasionally import duties had to be imposed to balance the budgets. But some time ago a new policy was adopted. If an individual has no natural children and does not adopt and nurture a child less than one year old, the state is the only legal heir. Thanks to prudence in expenditure, currently the tax rate is very marginal," said Vrinda.

"As it should always be," added Diva.

The doorbell interrupted the conversation. Vrinda rose, opened the door and ushered in three ladies dressed rather distinctively in black. Vrinda introduced. "These three form our legal council. You can say they are the supreme court here."

"Well," smiled one of them, "it is the lowest and the highest court!"

"We were informed, Vrinda," and I must point out "You did not and you should have," another stated matter of factly. "We have already issued orders to get the walkway along which he entered, she nodded her head at J, made more secure with a proper video surveillance. In future, any decision to permit entry will not be left to the operators there."

The third turned and bowed formally to J. "We are all grateful and obliged to you for saving the life of Ila and returning her to us. We would be more than willing to help you with any material requirements you may have, though we do honestly admit that nothing would equal the value of a life saved."

J responded equally formally. "It was a privilege to have helped Ila and your society. No. I do not have any material

requirements. I could return to where I came from without any problem."

The first one said, "Then we would prefer to formally and ceremoniously escort you back to your vessel. Though we will be left wondering if this would result in some future problem to Vaarana in the form of unwelcome visitors."

J emphatically said "I repeat what I told to your counselors here. You need have no fears on that score. I will not be the party to any kind of disturbance to your idyllic existence. I would however like to say goodbye to Ila."

"The whole of Vaarana is waiting outside to say thanks and goodbye rejoined" the lady. "Unfortunately, we do not have an auditorium that can hold everyone to have a public meeting."

The three formally shook hands with J, thanked him once again and bowed. As Vrinda opened the door, J noticed that the corridor was full of adults and children who formed two rows along the walls. Many were carrying flowers. As the three legal counselors, Vrinda and J slowly walked out there were cheers and expressions of thanks. Some of them hugged J to express their happiness. Many threw flower petals in his path. Several bowed low and a few even touched his feet. J was completely taken aback. He wanted to remember this moment forever. The

progress was very slow. There was no hint of unease or impatience in the the legal councilors who were quietly smiling and whispering to one another. He realized that formal interaction was their cultivated personality. Vrinda appeared lost in thought. Then suddenly J saw Ila, her sister Ani and her mother standing in a cove along the corridor.

Everyone hushed as he stepped across to them. Ila jumped into his arms and said "Mama told me you are leaving. I really wish you stay here but mamma said you have your own house to return to."

"Yes darling," J responded, "I have brought you to your house and your mama as I promised. Now it is time for me to return to my own place."

"But please do come again. I really wish you would come back with your little children and then we can all play together."

J smiled. "I do hope so darling. But remember I live so far away. It will take some time."

Her mother said in a low voice. "I can never ever repay you for your kindness, not in this life. I am praying to God that he will give me a chance to repay at least in the next."

J hugged her and told her. "Please do not unduly stress yourself. I haven't really done anything heroic. Moreover this visit has been so illuminating to me. I really have benefitted from the visit." He took leave and with difficulty and continued his way along the corridor through a cheering crowd.

It was like a world conquering hero being felicitated he mused. He never dreamed of himself in the league of heroes and there were no heroes in contemporary world. Then he realized with a start, that has been the price of progress for humanity. Everything was done by machines which neither expected nor needed gratitude. And Humanity at large has aped the machines. Human interactions have themselves become mechanical. He came out of his reverie with a start. The crowds had ended and they were entering the very hall through which he had walked in a few hours earlier.

Vrinda looked at him and smiled. "There is no other access, unless you decide to use a small boat from the beach."

"It is Ok," laughed J, "Today I carried Ila on that walkway. So walking alone would be very easy."

Vrinda turned to the three legal counselors who alone had entered the room along with them. "If you do not mind, I will accompany J till the boat."

"As you wish," said one. "We are all aware Vrinda of your ideas regarding the need for us to guide the outside world. You are equally aware that hardly anyone in Vaarana shares your opinion. I only hope you will not take more foolish decisions."

"All the best for the future Mr. J." With a formal bow, all three left the room, leaving Vrinda and J alone.

J wondered to himself '*what was all that about?*' Then he asked Vrinda. "I would have loved to extend our conversation. There are so many things I would love to know. Our conversation was rather abruptly stopped. But I do not want to put you into a lot of inconvenience by walking this way all the way to the pier."

Vrinda took a deep breath, "No. You are the only chance I have. I will spend as much time as possible with you. Possibly talking while walking on the walkway will not be feasible but we could wait a while on the pier and talk."

They came out of the room and slowly and carefully made their way to the pier. J kept looking at the various sights of Vaarana, realizing that this will be his last chance to do so. All too soon however they both reached the pier and stood in the cool sea breeze with the boat a few feet away swaying gently at anchor.

## IX

J asked Vrinda curiously, "How come you didn't even explain to the legal council?"

"We are not expected to," responded Vrinda. "They are elected for life by the individual adult residents. They are not paid any salary and cannot spend public money either on themselves or others. But everyone has to obey their instructions immediately and without argument. We find it works fine in practice."

"They obviously thought not informing them about my coming was a big mistake on your part. Obviously they would not have allowed me to stay even this long on Vaarana. You have any idea why?"

"Everyone here is aware of my idea that Vaarana should serve as a role model for the rest of the world. And almost no one agrees with me. They see the rest of the world as entirely populated by people who see in black and white,

not shades of grey. The believer and the infidel form such a pair for the Abrahamic religions. The scientific and the irrational is the division for the atheists. Undoubtedly that gives strength, most importantly to bend the rest to their way of thinking.

"The Abrahamic religions have decimated any tribal religion that came their way. The scientists follow suit. They bulldoze everyone to follow each and every scientific result they approve off. They claim to allow individual freedom but refuse to allow groups to segregate voluntarily. Both convert their opinions into commandments that are an embodiment of eternal truth which justifies their use of force against the dissenters. It is a worldview that praises the strength of an oak that challenges the wind not of a willow that bends to survive."

J asked curiously, "Are your views really shared by no one? Is that the view of everyone in Vaarana? Looks a bit like forced conformity"

Vrinda said despondently, "There are more extreme views. A few of the people here take our Hindu origin very seriously. In their view, no intellectual has ever conceded that the thanks to their unique concept of God, sectarian conflicts among Hindus were not violent but the Protestant -Catholic and Shia-Sunni conflicts resulted in the death of

millions. They point out that the so called intellectual honesty has not persuaded any atheist to ever concede that reformation of Hindu society in the nineteenth century was peaceful in contrast to the murder and mayhem that accompanied the Christian reformation over the previous couple of centuries."

"Of course the Muslim society has resisted reformation to this day and forced the atheists to compromise. The other religions have now turned literalist and formed their own enclaves," pointed out J.

"Yes. And that is another issue for them. They point out that the Hindu society somehow survived the Muslim rulers from the tenth to fifteenth centuries by bending very much like the willow but when climate change caused flooding of Bangladesh and resulted in mass Muslim migration, the Hindus could not survive at all. India disintegrated and only a transformation into a mirror image of Abrahamic religions has allowed them to survive in central and south India today.

"Everyone here ultimately think that the world cannot be civilized by us and we should not draw attention to ourselves in that attempt."

"You obviously do not agree with them," said J.

"Yes. The roots of the Vaarana philosophy may be traced to Hindu writings but the organization of Vaarana into a superior society is due to an honest analysis of human personality and capability. The role of Hindu roots is peripheral and all the world consists of similar humans who could be persuaded to accept our way of life."

"I am curious" said J, "When almost everyone is opposed to your idea why did they allow you to continue interacting with me here?"

"Because they cannot rationally justify stopping me. There will be no further damage due to my further interaction on this pier."

J burst out laughing, "Well! You people certainly do live up to your philosophy. But honestly what do you want me to do?"

"I have already told you. I am hoping that you will be able to spread our ideas."

J smiled, "I find your dreams even more unrealistic than the fears of your fellow citizens. If I go back to civilization and try to tell this story to anyone, the best I can hope for is a glass of beer for entertaining them. Most will not believe me and of the few who do, no one will undertake a long sea

journey to see Vaarana. Face the reality, Vaarana is not a new wonder of the world. I think it is wonderful because of what I am, Because of how my parents brought me up.

"If I try to tell this story to a member of the administration I am likely to get referred to psychiatric assessment first and even after the veracity is established, no one would outfit an invasion fleet. I suppose, I can write a book about it but the days for Voyage to Lilliput are long gone. There is just too much noise for you to be noticed.

"I asked you earlier if an all female society was necessary for Vaarana. You thought it was not necessary. But there are two other attributes of Vaarana that I believe are essential. Firstly it has to be small enough. Your informally elected representatives and unwritten freedoms work only at this size. The second is isolation. You said a few individuals go away from vaarana from time to time. It was only *few* because of isolation. Otherwise you would have ended up with undesirable intruders or empty nests. As I mentioned earlier, Vaarana came into being, a bit like emergence of a new species in evolution. Chance and necessity both played a part.

"Now you want me to become a *Super Intelligence* that designs such an entity on purpose. A bit like the superman idea in philosophy. Yes. A superman is a good concept and

I must admit after seeing Vaarana, you can think of replicating it. But I believe you are making a couple of errors. First and foremost you have to think of a slow growth of such an entity. The people will have to slowly come to terms with the essential limitations.

"So perhaps we have to think of it as some kind of Noah's ark. You start with the bare minimal necessities and then slowly help it grow. I am not saying that it is impossible. Nor am I saying that it is not worthy of doing. I for one would consider it a great privilege to even attempt such a program but..."

"But what?" asked Vrinda excitedly. "You are amazing. You could see so many facets that I never did see before. You are one capable of converting my dream into reality. I am so excited."

"I will come right out and tell what comes after the but. YOU. I need you not merely as a designer. From you I am expecting something far beyond providing a concept. I need you as a full partner in the endeavor. We will work together towards the project. We may or may not succeed. Let us be honest. But we can try. But without you it is beyond me. If I leave alone on that boat, it will be to continue to live my nomadic purposeless existence. You can return and reassure your co-residents that there are no

risks to Vaarana because of me. You cannot simply plant a seed. You have to nurture it and deliver a complete entity. The decision is yours."

J walked to the end of the pier and stood staring at the slowly setting sun. His life was genuinely at the crossroads. He was honest in his assessment. He knew that. Unless there was a partner to share, life itself was a void. To attempt the sort of Himalayan task that Vrinda was proposing was out of question. But was he being fair to Vrinda. He was asking her to break off with her entire life and join him on an irreversible journey into wilderness.

Was he using the possibility of a new Vaarana at the end of the road as a bait merely for his personal satisfaction? His chances of finding another individual to even have an honest communication is extremely unlikely in the contemporary world. Was he only looking for a life partner? He has to be honest to himself. He would be quite satisfied even if he did not succeed in the endeavor.

And the odds of succeeding are very low. That is a project for several generations. Would Vrinda accept failure as dispassionately as he himself? If she accepts that is. He hardly knew her. She may have an emotionally satisfying life here. She may not even be interested in a man! Creating a new Vaarana was apparently an intellectual

passion with her but would she be willing to sacrifice everything for it?

Vrinda was also lost in thought. She was stunned by the proposal that J set before her. She had at various times imagined how she would interest someone from the outside world in her vision. She considered and rejected several times the possibility of inducing someone from among the suppliers to Vaarana. She realized that J, with his knowledge, vision and more importantly his apathy to the present state of affairs in the outside world was incredibly suitable. It would be impossible to get another one, equally suitable, in her own lifetime. So this was her only chance.

Did she really want to participate in the creation process or was her interest merely an intellectual idea? Was she willing to sacrifice her entire life here in quest of this terribly challenging effort? Would she be able to continue her life in Vaarana without regrets if she did not take up the challenge?

She did not know much about J. But from the few remarks he made it, is obvious that he was extremely dissatisfied with his life and wanted a change to something not currently on offer in the outside world. Her own case was entirely different. Her mother was no longer alive and it is

true that no one on Vaarana would be heartbroken if she accepted this offer and left with J. She had several close friends who would miss her but would rapidly accommodate to her absence.

But she was completely satisfied with her life in Vaarana. Would she be satisfied with her life if the project did not get off the ground? Or would she be making herself and possibly J miserable repenting the loss of her satisfactory life in Vaarana? How committed would J be to her dream once he gets what he obviously desires, a life partner? Did the legal councilor guess that she would be facing this dilemma? Was that the reason she said "I hope you would not be making another mistake?"

The seconds ticked by and the sun started dipping into the ocean. As the rim of the orange sun disappeared below the waves, J turned around and asked "Is today a full moon day?"



The solitary man on the boat was sadly reviewing his own purposeless life and the state of the world in the twenty fifth century. He rescues a four year old girl from the sea and then realizes to his complete surprise that the girl has lived in male less society. Restoring the child to her family becomes a journey initially into a completely different society and ultimately a challenging offer to participate in transforming the world. This is the first attempt at a fictional narrative to complement the earlier books on science, philosophy, religion and society from a completely independent perspective.

Earlier books: The quest for new materials and Experimenting with the quantum world (Vigyan Prasar), How well do we know it? On walking the knife edge of science and religion, An unknown scientist in the ivory tower, India : My India, The lizard in the ear and forty modern variants Me and My universe : A conversation (Published at Pothi).